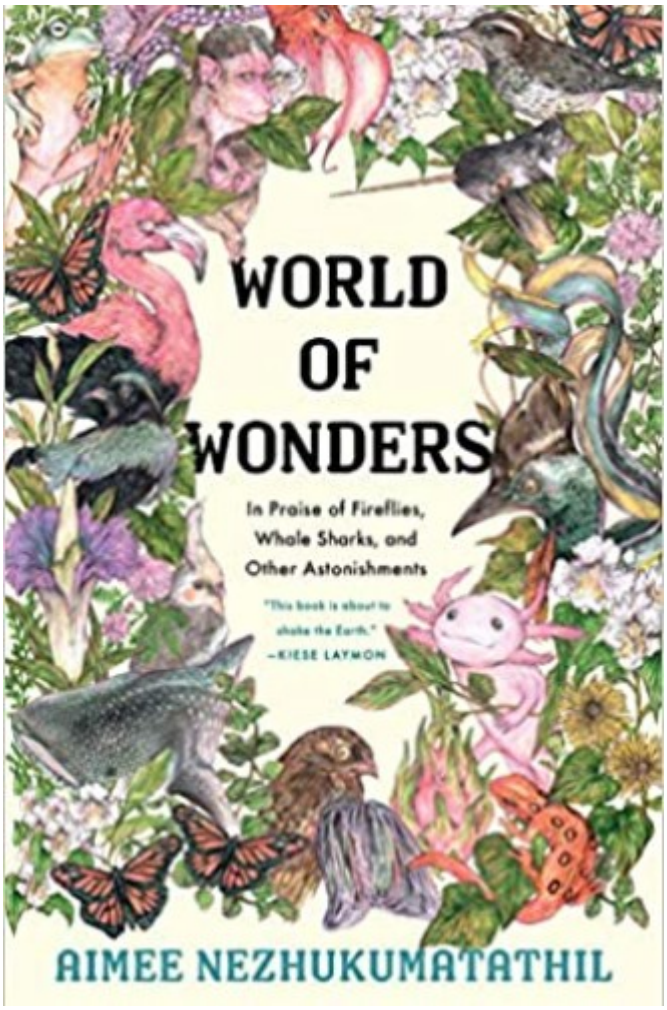
Aimee Nezhukumatathil shows us the worlds she sees

The poet’s collection of essays is so vivid, we can smell, hear, taste, touch, and see her rapture.

by Trish Beckman in the June 16, 2021 issue

In Review



World of Wonders

In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments

by Aimee Nezhukumatathil, with illustrations by Fumi Mini Nakamura
Milkweed Editions
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In a year when many of us have had to limit our travel to backyards and neighborhood parks, Aimee Nezhukumatathil's self-reflective essays promise that even there, our natural observations can attend to our deep worries, our seasoned griefs, and our unmitigated joys. We can revisit old trips anew. We can dream forward.

Nezhukumatathil takes us to the middle of the great inland freshwater sea, Lake Superior, to a spot where migrating butterflies take a sharp turn—baffling many until a geologist recognizes an ancient mountain beneath the lake floor. Our poet describes these monarch moves as "the loneliest kind of memory." She puts her arm around us, focuses our attention just right, and with humility excavates our deepest landscapes so that we are lonely no more.

In this book there are narwhals and thigmonasty, vampire squids and monsoons. There are axolotls with serene visages that "don't seem to ever develop scar tissue to hide damage from a wound." Like all the natural phenomena Nezhukumatathil collects for us, these amphibians are more than just docile, smiling creatures. They map onto human behaviors, at times with searing vindication.

Sometimes Nezhukumatathil allows readers to make the connections, as between the flamingo and the awkward college student with legs that outgrew her torso. Other times she draws the connections explicitly. Red-spotted newts wander the forest floor before finding a home, just like her human family seeks its own neighborhood during her childhood. Surely many of us have had a year like this, especially in the pandemic: "This was my cephalopod year, the closest I ever came to wanting to disappear or sneak away into the deep sea."

She has learned so much from various birds over the years that she can summon them by mimicking their calls, to the astonishment of those who love her. She is generous enough to induct readers into her secret method of entering others' territory in order to "try a little tranquility, find a little tenderness in your quiet." Changing the terrain—and changing ourselves within it—can transform us.

Like the bunting who navigates by the North Star, like the wild strawberry plants under a porch, Nezhukumatathil herself is a kind of natural guide. Her prose brings

readers into what she calls her “lyric register,” confirming just how hungry she is to find beauty in both bold and subtle connections of kinship. She helps us “understand how a galaxy first learns to spin in the dark.” Her poetic observations reek of sensory experiences so alive that it’s possible at times to smell, hear, taste, touch, and see the author’s rapture.

Rain smells like crow feathers and cumin, and a cara cara orange’s aroma brings cherry and rose petal. A cry in the rain forest elicits fear that it will be the last day on the planet. A smack of purple quartz inside a geode “tasted like campfire smoke.” Mixing the sensory in ways that ought to be absurd but somehow are not, Nezhukumatathil dares to show how fireflies stay “visually silent.” Her most vivid description of odor involves a corpse flower’s blooming.

Nezhukumatathil makes animals into characters, but not in a sterile, anthropomorphic way. Rather, she bends us into their worlds. We smile as bonnet macaques mock the lovers who travel in the jungle, evoking the jungle that is marriage. We root for the birds hiding in the forest who laugh as the adults get their numbers wrong on Audubon bird count day with small children in tow. We weep for the octopus whose sensory neurons take in Nezhukumatathil’s forearm, tasting her with its tentacles as it begins to die in her hands. We soar with the firefly through synchronous fields of light and into the devastation from our collateral violence. (Who could imagine that a firefly would have a “bibliography” and that it would wear a “tender and electric dress”?)

These characters are feast and symphony and fragrance all at once. Nezhukumatathil too is a character: the book is structured in the form of a memoir. She skirts too quickly a few important life phases, babies and tenure and other pivotal markers of habitat in human ecosystems. Even so, these are less noticeable as missing than as a kind of rebalanced reckoning. Their absence presents as an adjustment, a reordering of our attention.

World of Wonders teems with stunning illustrations by Fumi Mini Nakamura. These gorgeous images are meditations in themselves, not a sideshow to the real work of words. A creature with “the largest eye-to-body ratio of any animal on the planet” stares out at us, considering whether to pulse-swim away and confuse the reader. The corpse flower embarrasses us with its pungent heat while snouts, beaks, and enticing smiles crowd to the front of the page to take in the unsuspecting reader. This is reciprocal gazing.

Several friends and I have taken to Zoom with this book, reading chapters aloud to one another during these separated days. They tumble off the tongue, begging to be shared orally. Pretty soon we’re making our own short stories of trips to the store, walks on the beach, or moonlit nights. It occurs to us that Nezhukumatathil has succeeded beyond measure. Through her enticing companionship, we speak each other into our ecosystems. The planet knits itself back together as we sink into her extraordinary rhythms.